

Call to Worship:

The changing religious ideas at Sweet Briar College 1965-1967.

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January 31, 1991

Doing Sweet Briar History

Dr. G. Berg

"I pledge..."

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Emily M. Leming". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the printed text.

## I. Invocation

The years 1965-1970 represent a change in the mentality of many Americans. One area where there was a dramatic change was in religion, specifically christian thought. Traditional religious thought and values had and were changing. New ideas were spreading concerning the reality of God, and God's function in society. At a small womens college in rural Virginia these new ideas became increasingly more noticeable.

The College was Sweet Briar college. These changes in religious ideas affected all aspects of the college. The students, faculty, and administration, all were involved in these changes either with a desire to return to the old ideas or to move forward with the new ideas. The examination of the fall 1965 to spring 1967 express different ideas and their importance. The perception of the time period was that there was a decline in religion and religious practices.

In this paper, I will examine events of the Young Women's Christian Association, articles in the Sweet Briar News, Chapel Speeches and communications concerning the Chapel Dedication in April of 1967, as well as the events of the Chapel Dedication. The research of this paper consisted of examining the Sweet Briar News, specifically the years 1965-1967, files on the Chapel Dedication from 1965-1967, Chapel Speeches, 1966-1977, and Alumnae Magazines, 1967-68, all of these items are located either in the Fletcher Archives Room #2(Sweet Briar News, Alumnae Magazine), and the Archives Office (Chapel Dedication Files, and Chapel

Speeches).

I begin my paper with a description of the activities of the Y.W.C.A. Which is followed by an in depth examination of a two page spread which was published in the March 2, 1966 issue of the Sweet Briar News. The articles are all concerned with the new ideas being presented about God and Christianity. This section is followed by a speech which was given in the chapel in September of 1966 within this speech the very popular theme "God is Dead," theme will be discussed. The final section of this paper will focus on the Chapel Dedication and the preparation and problems that occurred during planning.

## II. Sermon

The Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.) played an active role in educating their fellow students in these new and different views concerning christianity. One of their first attempts were meetings held on Wednesday evenings to discuss christianity and the varying viewpoints that were becoming increasingly prevalent. One student explained these meetings which were entitled, "Dorm Devotions," as "meaningful to the religious life on campus."<sup>1</sup> An advertisement which appeared in the Sweet Briar News is the only evidence of these "Dorm Devotions." There is no record found that these meeting were successful or not. I suspect since there was no mention of them in any other publication that they were not as meaningul as suspected.

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<sup>1</sup>"Dorm Devotions," Sweet Briar News, 10 Nov. 1965: 1.

During this time period there was a great movement for unity among christian people. This was not only a movement by the Protestants but a movement by the Roman Catholics. The Pope in his visit to the United States in the Fall of 1965 was seeking to form an Ecumenical Council and to "open some windows" in liberalizing the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> At Sweet Briar college the Y.W.C.A., attempted to make an effort towards this goal of world unity by participating in the "Lenten World Day of Prayer" on February 25, 1966. The world theme for this day was "prayer for common needs."<sup>3</sup> The participation in this event was described as an "active experience in prayer" to promote christian fellowship and unity.<sup>4</sup> This project was lead by the "Y" students and under the direction of Professor Sarah Ramage of the English Department.<sup>5</sup> This is just one event which this group worked to maintaining a conscious effort to be involved in world religious activity.

In March 1966, the Y.W.C.A. sponsored their annual religious conference. The speaker at this conference was Rev. Dr. Schubert M. Ogden, an ordained Methodist minister and professor at The Perkins School of Theology.<sup>6</sup> In preparation for this conference, Ogden suggested that the students read

J.A.T. Robinson's "Honest to God" and "Honest to God Debate."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>"Pope's Visit to United States of Historical Significance," Sweet Briar News, 13 Oct. 1965: 2.

<sup>3</sup>"Lenten World Day of Prayer-To be Observed," Sweet Briar News, 23 Feb. 1966: 1.

<sup>4</sup>"World Day of Prayer," Sweet Briar News, 23 Feb. 1966: 1.

<sup>5</sup>"World Day of Prayer," Sweet Briar News, 23 Feb. 1966: 1.

<sup>6</sup>"Ogden-Religious Week," Sweet Briar News, 9 March 1966: 1.

<sup>7</sup>"Y.W.C.A. Conference," Sweet Briar News, 16 Feb. 1966: 1. J.A.T. Robinsons ideas are expressid in larger detail later in paper. Specifically, the section entailing the

Ogden chose the subject of the conference to be "The Reality of God" focusing on the "problem of God today, the reality of faith, and the move toward a new thesis of religion."<sup>8</sup> The conference was held over a three day period from March 13-15, each lecture pertained to Ogden's three different aspects of his topic, "The Problem of God Today, The reality of Faith, and a movement towards a new Theism."<sup>9</sup> This conference, along with, the topics discussed at the Southern Regional Council Y.W.C.A. meeting are the first mention of any new and different religious ideas spreading throughout the nation and beginning to affect the religious atmosphere at Sweet Briar College.

The Southern Regional Council of the Y.W.C.A. Annual Conference occurred a short time previous to the Sweet Briar Conference. At this convention, McLeod Bryon, Professor of Christian Social Ethics, from Wake Forest, informed, Sweet Briar Women and other members of the Y.W.C.A., that "God is where the action is! He is no longer shut out except for an hour on Sunday."<sup>10</sup> Bryon's stressed that God is everywhere.<sup>11</sup> This seems to be an attempt by Byron for a re-birth of the old ways. That God is everywhere and should take precedent in ones life as he once was previous to this time period.

At the end of the 1965-66 school year the Y.W.C.A. focused on christian entertainment recordings and films. One of these

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various new theological ideas.

<sup>8</sup>"Y.W.C.A. Conference," Sweet Briar News, 16 Feb. 1966: 1.

<sup>9</sup>"Y.W.C.A. Conference," Sweet Briar News, 16 Feb. 1966: 1.

<sup>10</sup>"Pitman Elected to Y.W.C.A.," Sweet Briar News, 23 Feb. 1966: 5.

<sup>11</sup>"Y.W.C.A. Conference," Sweet Briar News, 16 Feb. 1966: 1.

entertaining, yet educational recordings was "For Heavens Sake" a satirical christian drama. This drama focused on "man's estrangement" from God and "reconciliation" with God and faith.<sup>12</sup> This recording was produced for the North American Ecumenical Youth Assembly.<sup>13</sup> This recording's purpose seems to be to redirect people's religious thoughts and to join together in peace. Since it was produced by the Ecumenical Youth Assembly it will have the theme of unity among people and unity with God. In May 1966, the Y.W.C.A. sponsored the movie "The Parable." The movie portrayed Jesus as a clown in a circus who tried to help people and in the end was killed by the people of his circus they reformed and began to follow in his path of goodness. This movie was produced by the National Protestant Council of America.<sup>14</sup> Again this seemed to be another attempt to turn more people to the christian way of life. This movie also contains the aspect of unity because people try to imitate Jesus and work together in harmony after they reformed themselves. These last two programs complete the year for the Y.W.C.A. Other religious events occurred outside of the Y.W.C.A., specifically a two page article in the March 2, 1966 on the views of Christians though of the time.

The headlines above this two page focus in the newspaper are Volcanic Eruptions Jolt Christian Views, Today.<sup>15</sup> On these two pages there are four articles each written by students about popular

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<sup>12</sup>"Christian Satire", Sweet Briar News, 20 April 1966: 2.

<sup>13</sup>"Y.W.C.A. Conference," Sweet Briar News, 16 Feb. 1966: 1.

<sup>14</sup>"Y.W.C.A. to Sponsor The Parable", Sweet Briar News, 4 May 1966: 2.

<sup>15</sup>"Volcanic Eruptions Jolt Christian Views, Today." Sweet Briar News, 2 March 1966:

theologian during the mid nineteen-sixties. Three of the important theologians are Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann is only briefly mentioned in the first article. I am unsure of the reason why he was not included in the three articles. Their ideas are referred to as the "Three main 'streams' of new Theology."<sup>16</sup> The first article which is the lead article in this spread concerns varying opinions of various theologians. Within this spread two of these articles focus on Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A third article is written about Gabriel Marcel. "Each one with his own emphasis, has tried to re-interpret the Christian message in a meaningful way."<sup>17</sup> This is how the group was described by Peggy Pittman, one of the staff reporters.<sup>18</sup>

Peggy Pittman's article is entitled Revolutionary Implications Appear in Attitudes of New Theologians. The Right Reverend John Robinson is quoted by Pittman in reference in the necessity to change Christian thinking for survival.<sup>19</sup> "If Christianity is to survive . . . [it] must be relevant to modern secular man, not just to the dwindling number of the religious."<sup>20</sup> The re-thinking of Christianity includes "shaving off the supernatural aspects of religion and concentrating on immediate, response to the turmoil of life, they constitute an important contemporary school of religious

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<sup>16</sup>"Revolutionary Implications Appear in Attitudes of New Theologians," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 4.

<sup>17</sup>"Revolutionary Implications," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 4.

<sup>18</sup>Peggy Pittman was also Y.W.C.A. officer.

<sup>19</sup>"Revolutionary Implications," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 4. The same Robinson as J.A.T. Robinson mentioned earlier.

<sup>20</sup>"Revolutionary Implications," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 4.

controversy."<sup>21</sup> These statements can be qualified as the beginning tremors of the volcanic eruption.

Marguerite McKee's article, Tillichian Theology Seeks Truthful Christian Message, explains Paul Tillich's standpoint. Tillich is the easiest to understand. He feels the "underlying purpose . . . is the statement of the truth of the Christian Message, and the interpretation of this truth for every generation."<sup>22</sup> The truth of the Christian message seems to be bridging the gaps between various groups, closing the gaps between different disciplines, God's infinite power, and unity of life.<sup>23</sup> Tillich's viewpoint is easy to understand. The ideas are also very similar to previous religious thought but have qualities such as unification important to Tillich's theory.

However, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is a little different and is less comprehensible. The article on Bonhoeffer, was written by Ludy Blundon, the title is Bonhoeffer Argues for Religion-Less Christianity. Bonhoeffer would produce a very large volcanic eruption, especially with the older generation. Bonhoeffer wants to "de-mytholize" Christianity. An abstract example of this would be to "deny that anything in the Bible is meaningful."<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer's idea is to focus less on the functions of religion such as worship services, and to concentrate more on "the ways of God."<sup>25</sup> |

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<sup>21</sup>"Revolutionary Implications," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 4.

<sup>22</sup>"Tillichian Theology Seeks Truthful Christian Message", Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 4.

<sup>23</sup>Tillich, SB News, 3/2/66: 4.

<sup>24</sup>"Bonhoeffer Argues for Religion-Less Christianity," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 5.



interpret "the ways of God" as to love one another, and to live contently. Ludy Blundon feels "his contribution is a liberated theology for Christianity in our time."<sup>26</sup>

The fourth article is written by Vicki Chainski, concerning Gabriel Marcel, it is entitled Experimental Philosophy Has Faith. Marcel was a Catholic existentialist.<sup>27</sup> Chainski explains that "Marcel makes a uniquely significant attempt within the existential framework, to give a concrete explanation of human existence without compromising man or denying God."<sup>28</sup> Marcel concentrated on faith, hope, and love. Faith was defined as "willful participation on the part of the individual who brings meaning into reality through his invocation of God."<sup>29</sup> Prayer to God is the important factor in faith, and individuality within prayer. Marcel feels that there is an "indefinable link between human and divine powers."<sup>30</sup> Hope, according to Marcel is "individual guarantees his/her own integrity by an unselfish fidelity to others."<sup>31</sup> The key to hope is to be happy individually by helping others without any doubt. Love is the common factor in every one of these people's ideas. Each seems to have the same goal of peace and harmony among all people.

The four articles express awareness by the students that times are changing and religious thought is re-organizing itself. The

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<sup>25</sup>Bonhoeffer, SB News 3/2/66: 5.

<sup>26</sup>Bonhoeffer, SB News 3/2/66: 5.

<sup>27</sup>"Revolutionary Implications," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 4.

<sup>28</sup>"Experimental Philosophy Has Faith," Sweet Briar News, 2 March, 1966: 5.

<sup>29</sup>Bonhoeffer, SB News 3/2/66: 5

<sup>30</sup>Bonhoeffer, SB News 3/2/66: 5

<sup>31</sup>Bonhoeffer, SB News 3/2/66: 5

importance of this subject must have had some magnitude on the students otherwise why would the school newspaper have a two page layout specifically concerning new theological developments. One aspect which was not examined within the March 2 issue of the school newspaper is the theory that "God is Dead?"

The "God is Dead" Theory is examined some time later in the Fall of 1966 at the Chapel Speech held on September 27.<sup>32</sup> The presenter of this speech attacks this theme, the person believes that one "will not find God by accepting that God is dead."<sup>33</sup> This speaker does feel that there is a necessity for "reconceiving and recasting of Christian Doctrine but he or she does not believe that God is Dead! "The church of the living God is in need of a new reformation," which will "cleanse-Christian faith of false doctrines, superstitions, and myths."<sup>34</sup>

During the year 1965, Sweet Briar was in the process of building the Memorial Chapel. After the building was completed the plans for the dedication for the Chapel began to be formulated. In the winter and spring of 1966 and through April of 1967 there was a planning committee for this special event. The members of the committee consisted of both students and faculty.<sup>35</sup> The committee was chaired by Professor Garner of the religion department. The plans for the dedication included an organ recital, a lecture, panel discussion, and the actual dedication ceremony.<sup>36</sup> Dr. Garner wrote

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<sup>32</sup>"1st Chapel Talk," September, 27, 1966, Chapel Speeches, 1966-1977. Could not identify speaker

<sup>33</sup>"1st Chapel Talk," September, 27, 1966, Chapel Speeches, 1966-1977.

<sup>34</sup>"1st Chapel Talk," September, 27, 1966, Chapel Speeches, 1966-1977.

<sup>35</sup>Letter, Dr. Garner to Malcolm Boyd, 1/5/67

several communications with possible speakers at these functions and expressed many desires for this enormous event. Dr. Garner in several different communication expressed her feelings about the students at Sweet Briar and their lack of knowledge of the Christian Faith. In one letter she wrote she stated that the students were "not very informed about their religious heritage, many of them perhaps a bit doubtful that it has much relevance."<sup>37</sup> It was Garner and the committee's hope "to show the faith as visible, intelligible, and desirable."<sup>38</sup> Much of the communication was to locate speakers for the lecture, and panel discussion. A letter from one clergy to Dr. Garner concerning another member of the clergy described the man as "a very sane person and is not carried away by some of the current extravagancies."<sup>39</sup> This indicates the desire for someone who is not wrapped-up in the "new" theologies described previous to this. These feelings are those of the older generation not necessarily the feelings of the students.

The Chapel Dedication was proposed by the faculty and administration to be a mini-symposium. This mini-symposium was going to replace a larger symposium. In May of 1966 there was a proposal in the Sweet Briar News that the Chapel Dedication not replace the other symposium. The students believed that the symposium should deal with a "contemporary situation."<sup>40</sup> This

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<sup>36</sup> Invitation to the Chapel Dedication, Chapel Dedication File 1966-1967.

<sup>37</sup> Chapel Dedication File, Garner to Boyd 5/19/66

<sup>38</sup> Chapel Dedication File, Garner to Deschner, 5/25/66

<sup>39</sup> Chapel Dedication File, MacQuarrie to Garner, 5/24/66

<sup>40</sup> "Editor' Note" Sweet Briar News 11 May 1966: p.2

shows that the student's did not view the chapel dedication as a "contemporary situation" of major importance. The student's were granted their wish and held symposium the next year separate from the Chapel Dedication.<sup>41</sup>

The plans for the Chapel Dedication continued. The first major event was to occur on Friday evening April 25, 1967 was established to be a Lyman Lecture, given by Dr. Albert C. Outler, Professor of Historical Theology at Southern Methodist University.<sup>42</sup> A suggestion to Dr. Outler, was to speak on the ecumenical movement because of its importance in the "world at large."<sup>43</sup> The topic of the lecture ended up being The Liberal Spirit and the Future of Religion.<sup>44</sup> The Panel Discussion which seemed to be the most important event of this particular weekend.

The title of this discussion was The Meaning and Relevance of God. The panel consisted of The Right Reverend Stephen F. Bayne, The Reverend Franklin Clark Fry, and The Reverend John MacQuarrie. Each of these men held very prestigious positions either within the church or theological schools. Each member of the panel spoke for fifteen minutes and then the discussion was opened up to the floor. Bishop Bayne's main focus was that the "wholeness of the structure is gone."<sup>45</sup> Bayne believes there is a need for the "fundamental questions" to be asked and answered, and the most radical answers will answer the basic questions.<sup>46</sup> Dr. Fry focused on individuality

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<sup>41</sup>"Editor' Note" Sweet Briar News 11 May 1966: p.2

<sup>42</sup>Chapel Dedication File, Invitation to Chapel Dedication: List of events.

<sup>43</sup>Chapel Dedication File, Kirby to Outler, 11 May 1966.

<sup>44</sup>Chapel Dedication File, Invitation to Chapel Dedication: List of events.

<sup>45</sup>"Meaning and Relevance," Sweet Briar News, 28 April 1967: 3.

in faith, similar to Marcel's ideas, one must concentrate on themselves before, they can reach out to others.<sup>47</sup> Dr. MacQuarrie believes that parts of this growing concept of atheism is good because it forces christians to examine christianity and "forced honesty."<sup>48</sup> MacQuarrie believed "if some people didn't go to extremes, others wouldn't be moderate."<sup>49</sup> These are examples of very informed religious leaders who feel the need for change. The "new theologians through their extremes, their questions have aided the task of Theology, which is to interpret and clarify the faith."<sup>50</sup> This panel seemed to be an effort by the administration to make the students aware of these theologians and their conservative nature towards the new ideas popular at the time. There was a request by Martha VonBriesen for copies of each statement<sup>51</sup> but that request is not completed due to the fact that Fry felt it would be better to speak from notes and "rely on the Audience."<sup>52</sup> I could go into further detail of this event if I had the hard copies of their speeches, which I was unable to locate. This panel discussion was not as overwhelmingly popular as the committee had expected because "attendance not as high as expected."<sup>53</sup> But their was a feeling of accomplishment towards education those young women

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<sup>46</sup>"Meaning and Relevance," Sweet Briar News, 28 April 1967: 3.

<sup>47</sup>"Meaning and Relevance," Sweet Briar News, 28 April 1967: 3.

<sup>48</sup>"Meaning and Relevance," Sweet Briar News, 28 April 1967: 3.

<sup>49</sup>"Meaning and Relevance," Sweet Briar News, 28 April 1967: 3.

<sup>50</sup>"Meaning and Relevance," Sweet Briar News, 28 April 1967: 3.

<sup>51</sup>Chapel Dedication File, Garner to Bayne, 4/3/67

<sup>52</sup>Chapel Dedication File Fry to Garner, 4/5/67

<sup>53</sup>Alumnae Magazine, Summer 67, p.3

that attended. Those women left the program "with a much deeper understanding of the significance of the Christian faith."<sup>54</sup>

A minor part of the Chapel Dedication Weekend was the memorial service for Dr. Meta Glass, former president of the College who had passed away recently. I mention this event because a statement was made by a student in the alumnae magazine which shows the importance of Chapel attendance to some students. Meta Glass' Memorial was attended by the regulars "and many who don't frequent this area quite so often."<sup>55</sup> This statement seem rather sarcastic to those who did not attend Chapel regularly.

The most important event of this weekend was the Chapel Dedication itself. The ceremony was performed by Most Reverend John E. Hines, who was the Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States.<sup>56</sup> This obviously was a prestigious event with the highest Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States as the dedicator. The other dignitaries included the clergy of Lynchburg and Amherst, various clergy on the state level, various student leaders, Judicial Board President, President of the Y.W.C.A., Student Government President, and the President of the college all were important members of the opening procession.<sup>57</sup> Not very much is said about this event. I could not find attendance records or statements about any sermons that were administered at this time.

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<sup>54</sup>Alumnae Magazine, Summer 67, p.3

<sup>55</sup>Alum Mag, Summer 67 p. 3

<sup>56</sup>Chapel Dedication File, Southwestern Episcopalian. Publication of the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia.

<sup>57</sup>Chapel Dedication File, Dedication Program.

The only comments from a student concerning the event were in the Alumnae Magazine. Student Government President 1968-69, Frances Kirvan stated that "perhaps, our new Chapel will make us want to explore more fully our spiritual needs along with our quest for knowledge in the whole field of liberal arts."<sup>58</sup> I am under the impression that the new Chapel in the end has not increased interest in the connection between spiritual needs and liberal arts.

### III. Benediction

"Religion itself is a controversial, and at the same time, a neglected aspect of our college life."<sup>59</sup> This quotation seems to be a significant conclusion to this paper. It has shown that religion on a college campus does not play a major role except for a certain segment of the population and the new ideas that were being formulated and examined at the time were different and unusual. These Changing ideas of religion evident at Sweet Briar are due to the change in national and world ideas towards religion. As stated in the "Invocation" the perception of this time was that religion was suffering from a decline in importance, I think that it really was a modification of religion and religious ideas. This was a period of liberalization, not only found in religion but in almost every aspect of life. This dramatic and sometimes radical changes brought new ideas and practices into life that were to affect the future of the world.

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<sup>58</sup>Alum Mag, Summer 67 p. 3

<sup>59</sup>Alum Mag, Summer 67 p. 3

## Bibliography

Chapel Dedication 1965-1967 [CD], Archives office, Far left filing cabinet, top drawer.

Contains letters, and publications concerning the Chapel Dedication. Informative information concerning administrative and faculty views.

Chapel Speeches, 1966-1977,[CS] Archives office, Far right filing cabinet, third drawer.

Contains speeches given at Chapel Services. Used for identifying ideas promoted by speakers at Sweet Briar. Very Helpful.

Sweet Briar News, 1927 -1979 [SB News], Fletcher Archives Rm #2, left side of room, 5th column, bottom. Used for student perceptions on religion at SBC. Helpful when topic can be found.

Sweet Briar College Alumnae News, 1931-1986 [Alum. Mag.] Fletcher Archives, 2nd Column, 4th shelf. Student and Alumnae reflections on Chapel Dedications and religious ideology. Helpful, because gave insight not found in SBC News.